



FAMILIES TALK MAKATON

"Four years is a long time without any form of communication."
Noreen

Is your child having trouble communicating with you?

Have you ever heard of Makaton Key Word Signing and wondered if it might help you and your child?

Have you ever wondered what other families think about Makaton?

Do you think signing is only for people who can't hear?

Learning Links has used Makaton Key Word Signing (often simply called *Makaton*) for many years to help families who have problems communicating with children under six years old. Some of our families have generously offered to share their stories with you to help give you a better understanding of Makaton and how it can help children. The questions used in interviews have come from the many Learning Links families I have worked with over the years and who have taught me so much. (Jane Purcell Speech Pathologist and Makaton Presenter, Learning Links.)

Thank you to the following families who so generously shared their stories.

- **Melissa and her daughter Alyssa.** Alyssa is two years old and has Down Syndrome. She has two older sisters who are aged seven and four.
- **Noreen and her son Andreas.** Andreas is four and has Beckwith Wiederman Syndrome that affects his speech. He has a sister who is seven.
- **Hue and her son Anthony.** Anthony is four years old and has delays in his development. He has a sister who is two.
- **Verna and her son Anthony.** Anthony is 19 months old and has Down Syndrome. He has a sister who is six.

- **Renee and her daughter Ella.** Ella is four years old and has a severe language delay. Ella has a brother who is six and a sister who is almost one.
- **Robyn and her daughter Emily.** Emily is three years old and has Down Syndrome
- **Sandra and her son Matthew.** Matthew is six and has delayed speech. He has an older sister who is 9 and a younger sister who is 3.
- **Maha and her son Zachary.** Zachary is two years old and has delays in his development. He has four siblings aged 13, 11, nine and four.

What is Makaton Vocabulary (Key Word Signing)?

Makaton Key Word Signing began as a Makaton Vocabulary list of about 700 words or concepts. It was originally developed in the United Kingdom in the 1970s and was brought to Australia in the 1980s. The Makaton approach was used to assist the language of children and adults.

“Makaton uses a key word approach. This means that people use speech with their signs but they do not sign every word. They only sign the key words of the sentence. Makaton also borrows features from Auslan (Australian Sign Language). It incorporates many of the visual strategies such as body language, gesture and facial expression. This usually reinforces the meaning of what is being communicated. It does not use finger-spelling or sign makers (for grammar).” Source: Makaton, Auslan, Signed English – What’s the difference? By Karen Bloomberg, Communication Resource Centre 2007.

Who should use Makaton?

Makaton can assist the communication of many children but is not suitable for everyone. It is not usually used with children who are Deaf, and is different from Auslan (Australian Sign Language), the language of the Deaf community.

Every child is unique, so it is best to consider your child individually. If your child sees a Speech Pathologist or an Early Childhood Specialist, you can talk to them about what would be best for your child.

Why use Makaton?

For some children talking and understanding don’t come easily.

Some children have difficulty saying and understanding words and they find it hard to communicate their thoughts, wants, needs and feelings. Sometimes these children may have a delay in their development, a disability, a specific speech/language delay, or may just be slow to talk. Life can be equally as frustrating for families who cannot communicate with their child.

Makaton can give children a way to get their message across when talking is difficult. It can also help children understand what is said to them.

It is widely used with children with Down Syndrome who can understand more of what is being communicated when it is presented in a visual way. It is also used with children with developmental delays, severe speech delays and verbal dyspraxia. It can also be used in rare cases as a substitute for speech. Learning to express and understand words such as *more*, *help*, *eat* and *finished* can make a huge difference to a child who may never have had words.

“Our son Anthony has Down Syndrome. I got some information from a booklet that the hospital gave us and we got in touch with Learning Links. When we started with Learning Links, we heard about Makaton and Key Word signing and the importance of using it when there is delayed speech.

“At first I was scared. It was all new to us and we never had any exposure to Down Syndrome prior to Anthony. I was scared because I worried that he was going to be deaf. It wasn’t about the course but why we were doing it. Once we had Anthony’s hearing test, I felt a bit more comfortable because he passed and I thought, there’s nothing wrong with his hearing – it’s fantastic.

*“Parents who had done the Makaton course and used Makaton said it’s good to know it, because if he’s got delayed speech, how’s he going to communicate with you other than grunting and making sounds? It’s better that you learn to sign and teach him better communication.” **Verna***

*“When Makaton was first mentioned, I was a bit horrified to think that she needed speech therapy and it did take me a while to get my head around why she would need Makaton. Now I think it is the most important aspect of having a baby with Down Syndrome. Alyssa only says a few words but she signs so much (over 100 signs). Without Makaton, she wouldn’t be able to communicate.” **Melissa***

*“At first my husband was concerned about using Makaton. He doesn’t come from Australia. When I said signing, he thought oh my son’s deaf – he can’t hear. But then we talked about the fact that Zachary can hear - it’s just with signing, it’s easier for him to understand. Once he started noticing that our son understood and it made him less frustrated, he got on board.” **Maha***

*“When Makaton was first mentioned to me I thought do I really need to do that? Now I say, do it. Introduce it as you’re talking and doing things – you do a sign so it becomes a natural part of your life.” **Robyn***

I didn’t realize how limited her verbal communication was until a great aunt babysat her when she was about 6months old. When I went to pick her up, she said “what’s this scratching of the hand?” (“biscuit’ sign). I said that’s ‘biscuit’ and the only way she has to tell you that is by signing. So then I printed off a few copies of the sign and sent them to her.

“The sound or their attempt to say the word is clearer when they use the sign. You know what they’re saying. I use it because it helps. It decreases frustration for the child and it’s another form of communication.” Sandra

Will Makaton stop my child from talking or slow their talking down?

No.

Using Makaton will not stop your child from talking if they are going to talk. When we use Makaton, we always talk at the same time as we sign and encourage children to use as many sounds or words as they can.

“I thought if I introduced the signs to Matthew, he’d become comfortable with using sign and not attempt to speak. Don’t think that by learning to sign, your child is not going to talk, because signing will stimulate their speech. It has helped, because I’ve noticed all the signs he uses, he can also say the words which I am really happy with. He’s less frustrated. He can communicate what he wants quicker. He’s very happy when he gets his message across.

“I talk to my son in two languages – English and Croatian, and Matthew also has some words in Croatian. Now he’s signing ‘thank you’ which is great, but he can’t say it – he can only say the vowels – ‘ah’ and ‘ew’.” Sandra

“I think it helps Anthony when I talk. I give him the sign and he says the word.” Hue

“Zachary has been diagnosed with a developmental delay and there’s something wrong with his sensory as well. He didn’t make eye contact, he was always sick. He was different to the other kids – they understood words and he didn’t. He never spoke a word until two months ago.

“I began signing when Zachary was two. It was during our first home visit (with a Speech Pathologist). At first I thought, this isn’t going to work. Then, the more I did it, the more he took notice, and the more he took notice, the more he understood, and the more he understood, the more he kept on doing it himself, and now he’s talking! He talks with words like ‘fin’ (finished) and he says ‘more, more, more’.” Maha

“Makaton doesn’t stop their talking. It enhances the way they can talk, and they will use both together or a sign and then a word. As children learn more Makaton, their ability to communicate widens.” Robyn

How can I keep encouraging my child's talking?

When we use Makaton signs, we always speak the word(s) at the same time to encourage speech. The current research indicates that children will not become dependant on sign and stop trying to speak. It is important for your child to hear what you are saying, and one of the benefits of Makaton Key Word Sign is that when we speak to our children, we slow our speech down and emphasise and repeat words.

It can also help to watch what your child is interested in and to talk about this. If we can move so that we are at our child's level and can see their face, this can help us connect with our child.

"It stops their frustration and your frustration. I am a better language model because Makaton has helped me slow down and be clearer." **Renee**

"Signing reinforces the spoken word." **Sandra**

When should I start using Makaton with my child?

There is no simple answer because each child is different. You should seek information from your child's Speech Pathologist, Early Childhood Specialist or from a Makaton Presenter.

You don't need to know a lot of signs to start using Makaton with your child. Often families wait for their child to start looking and listening to speech. Some families wait for their children to communicate by looking or pointing at what they want. Other families have found that using Makaton has helped their child pay attention to speech and understand words.

"I began using Makaton with Emily around six months. Her first sign was 'finish' when she was about one". **Robyn**

"We started when Matthew was three. We didn't do much at first; we just used it at preschool. He has about 20 signs now". **Sandra**

"We started using Makaton when Anthony was four years old." **Hue**

"Ella was about one and a half when we started using Makaton." **Renee**

"We started signing with Zachary when he was two years and four months." **Maha**

“Anthony was about eight months old when we started signing a little bit – I wouldn’t say a lot, but I’d say over the past two or three months, I’m doing it a lot more.” **Verna**

“I started signing with Alyssa when she was about five months old. I kept it really simple – ‘bottle’, ‘more’, ‘food’, and I stuck with those. I signed them every time I said the word. I knew she understood because of her facial expression and her response.” **Melissa**

What key word signs should I start teaching my child?

Makaton can often be the means by which a child first expresses their wants, needs and feelings to others. It can be a way for them to have more control and choice in their everyday life. Choose Makaton Key Word Signs carefully, keeping in mind that your child will be motivated by signs that are of interest and are used daily. These may be words that are part of their routine. Some signs are easier for your child to make with their hands.

It can help to think about what things your child might want to say to you or something they have tried to communicate about before but have had difficulty. Often, all the people involved with a child will talk about and choose the Key Word Signs together.

Keep in mind that it can be more useful for a child to have a small number of signs that they use to communicate independently, rather than a large number of signs that they can only imitate.

Makaton has a better chance of success if your family members all feel ready and able to start using Makaton.

“We didn’t do the whole lot; just the ones we needed – that helped Matthew”. **Sandra**

“I began by signing ‘more’ with Anthony. He did it about two months ago at seventeen months – his first sign apart from ‘music’. I think he was doing ‘music’ for a while but I didn’t realise that it was actually ‘music’.” **Verna**

“We chose everyday stuff like ‘finish’, ‘more’, ‘wash’, ‘mum’, ‘dad’ and ‘sleep’. We didn’t worry about ‘Nan/Pop’ or distinguishing between ‘tired’ or ‘sleep’. They were easy concepts that someone with her ability was able to understand.” **Robyn**

“We are now using it to teach concepts like ‘big’ and ‘little’.” **Noreen**

“I started using the ‘eat’ sign with Anthony. When I cut something for him to eat – he loves to eat - I tell him, you do the sign and I will give it to you. Now, Anthony signs ‘eat’, ‘toilet’, ‘good’, ‘jump’, ‘more’, ‘grandma’ and ‘thank you’.” **Hue**

Can I use pictures or photos when I use Makaton?

Yes.

Words are just one of a number of things that adults use to communicate. To get our message across, most of us use a combination of words, tone, loudness, gestures, body language and facial expressions.

One idea is to use visual images that your child recognises and responds to, to assist understanding and communication. For example, you could show photos of what your child does in his day, while you use Makaton Key Word Signing as you talk and share time together.

In addition to visual images, there are a variety of approaches that can help children with speech and communication. When we use these as an alternative to speech or as an add-on to speech, they are called Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC). As each child is unique, it is best to discuss other communication methods with your Speech Pathologist or Early Childhood Specialist.

“Anthony uses photos and pictures as well. They are in the bedroom, the kitchen and on the fridge. Anthony has also begun to use photos to communicate. The other day, he went to the photo album, took the picture of his grandma out and signed ‘grandma’. He has improved. He tries to say some easy words and sometimes hard words – not exactly the same but he tries. Anthony also understands more Vietnamese too. We mainly speak to him in Vietnamese”. **Hue**

“We also used pictures and photos with Andreas – it helped him understand the steps in everyday activities.” **Noreen**

What is the best way to learn Makaton?

Everyone learns in a different way and there is no right way to learn Makaton Key Word Signing. Some people find it easy to learn, others find it a bit harder. Usually, the more you use Makaton, the easier it is to remember.

“The repetition helped me learn Makaton. I don’t have a good grasp of languages at all. Having a person show you how to do it, is a lot easier than looking at the pictures of signs.” **Robyn**

“The pictures (in the book) are very hard to learn from. I just learnt from watching someone else at playgroup. I know about twenty signs now”. **Hue**

"It helped me when I learnt one or two signs a week and put them up on the fridge".

Noreen

"Emily has a huge number of signs – she's got more than her father. She's teaching him."

Robyn

"I'm learning with my son's Speech Therapist – we learn as we go. We'd get a book and practice signs".

Sandra

What if my child isn't learning Makaton quickly?

Don't worry and don't rush. It takes time for both adults and children to learn about communicating.

There are things that we have learnt over time that can help make it easier to learn Makaton.

- Choose signs that are motivating and interesting for your child.
- Try to avoid choosing signs that are all about what you would like your child to do, e.g., 'sit', 'listen' and 'wait'.
- Choose signs that can be used daily and in everyday environments.
- Use the signs you have chosen to learn every time you say the word.
- Use signs in all the environments that your child is in; for example, at Preschool and at home.
- Use signs everyday and all through the day, as learning happens with frequent repetition in everyday environments.
- Even if your child cannot make the sign themselves, keep using the sign. Seeing the sign can help them understand what others are saying.
- Children often learn best when learning is fun and rewarding.

"I started signing as soon as I did the Makaton course. But I wasn't consistent though. It was all new; it was like a different language all together. I used to think – ok it's time to do signing now. I wasn't really enjoying it at first and it was hard to remember. I was lucky if I'd remember one sign after a course.

"When I went to a number of courses I started to remember more. But it was putting it into a routine with Anthony that made the difference.

"Just trying to start signing didn't work for me. When I put Makaton in a routine I was doing, I remembered more and I was doing it more. Even now, I don't know all of them but I'm using more of them when I am in a routine with Anthony.

The trick is teaching my family to use the correct sign, otherwise Anthony will get confused. The whole family has to be consistent to avoid this."

Verna

“If we consistently use it with him, he’ll actually understand it and the more you use it, the more he’ll understand. It was my fault because I didn’t promote it in the beginning because he didn’t make eye contact. Makaton and having Occupational therapy both helped Zachary’s eye contact.

*“Try it and don’t get discouraged when it first doesn’t happen. It helps to use it over and over again. Use the same word and the same actions over and over again and it will eventually happen. It makes his life easier and he’s less frustrated.” **Maha***

*“You have to do it all the time. It’s the absolute key.” **Melissa***

*“I didn’t need to sit him down to teach him, he just picked the signs up in everyday situations. You need to use it at the Preschool and at home. If your Preschool doesn’t want to use it, it’s not really going to work.” **Sandra***

Who can help my child and family in using Makaton?

You know your child best and what is interesting and motivating for them. Share this information with your family, friends, child’s Speech Pathologist and Early Childhood Specialists and work together to make a plan for your child.

Recently, Melissa organized for a Makaton Presenter to come to her house and share Makaton Key Word Signing with thirty two family members and friends.

*“The staff at Matthew’s preschool were able to support me. This year, we’ve done a course with all the teachers and they’re all using it there.” **Sandra***

*“The preschool staff are going to teach all the children at Emily’s centre. That way, all the children can communicate with each other – even those who aren’t language delayed.” **Robyn***

*“My Speech Pathologist helped. She put signs that I would use in a particular room and laminated them and put them on the wall and it helped a lot”. **Verna***

*“My Speech Pathologist gave me laminated sheets of the signs and at my playgroup they use them for everything - they have visuals made like cartoon drawings. Even my son’s preschool is using signing. They use the ‘sleep’ one a lot, the ‘finish’ and the ‘go’. They use a lot of the basic ones.” **Maha***

When should I stop using Makaton with my child?

Every child is unique. Children show us when they no longer require the signs by using their speech clearly and confidently without signing.

It is important not to rush this stage, so that we don't leave children without a way to communicate. Sometimes children who can use words well, still have days where they may be tired, sick, or overwhelmed, and it is hard to get the words out.

"Now the words are starting to come out, we are using it less." **Sandra**

What if my child has difficulty making signs with his hands?

In general, signs can be easier to make than saying words. Young babies often start making gestures before they can say any words.

Often children start by making signs that look different to the ones that we use as adults. It can be like a child who is learning to say words but doesn't say them clearly at first.

It's important that we respond positively to our children's attempts to communicate. Later, we can give them support to help them make the best sign that they can. We can do this by showing them the sign clearly and repeating it.

For some children who are happy to have hands-on support, we can gently help them sign. It is important that we watch to see how each child responds to this as some children do not like their hands to be touched. For some children who continue to have difficulty, it is important that we accept and respond to what it is that they are trying to tell us. Often, photos of the way these signs are made can help us remember them.

"Matthew has low muscle tone, so he couldn't do the 'finish' (sign) but we modified it and we all know what he meant. Now he's changing it and says 'done' instead of 'finish'." **Sandra**

"Andreas often made up his own signs and was very animated. We responded to these and tried to be positive." **Noreen**

"Alyssa hasn't got all her signs refined but I know exactly what she means." **Melissa**

"Sometimes you have to look closely for what he is trying to do. With 'finish' – he just waves his thumb and his hands – we can tell it's 'finished'. With the word 'more', he doesn't actually get his hand off his chest but you know it's 'more' and he says it as well. The more he uses it, the clearer the word is getting." **Maha**

Where do you go for help?

Makaton Australia is the national organisation and can give you information about training and resources such as CDs, books and DVDs. They can be contacted by phone on (02) 4921 6293 or at www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/sed/makaton.